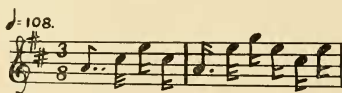


A REMARKABLE HERMIT THRUSH SONG.

BY HENRY OLDYS.

WHILE filling a lecture engagement at Hanover, N. H., early in May, 1913, I was the guest of Dr. Frederic P. Lord, of Dartmouth College. On the morning of the 6th my host and I visited a point near Pompanoosuc, Vt., where a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers nest annually. We were only partly successful in our quest — we heard one of the birds we were seeking, but failed to catch even a momentary glimpse of either of the pair. This disappointment, however, was far more than compensated for by the fact that as we sat in the mossy woods waiting for the woodpeckers I heard one of the most remarkable bird songs that has come to my ears during my twenty years' study of bird music. The singer, a Hermit Thrush, was in plain sight not more than forty or fifty feet away and gave ample opportunity for careful noting of the song.

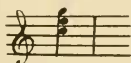
The ordinary song of the Hermit Thrush is made up of different phrases each consisting of a sustained basal note followed by a run of higher, more rapid, and lighter notes composing a broken chord whose fundamental tone is the preceding sustained note. The second part of the phrase,—the running notes—suggests the thought that a material chord of glass has been shattered into fine bits and that the crystalline fragments come tinkling down through the leaves. Sometimes other notes than those of the chord are introduced in the run but without destroying the character of the sustained note as the fundamental tone. Illustrations will make this description clearer —



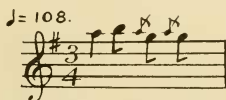
This example is from a record I secured at Hebron, Me., in 1905. Another, taken from a Hermit Thrush in the New York Zoölogical Park —



shows the introduction of a passing note, F, without destroying the idea of the chord —

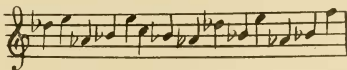


Interspersed with these phrases are very high, light, short phrases that punctuate the others somewhat after the style of the refrain so common in old songs and poems. Thus, the Hebron thrush sang, after the phrase quoted —



which might be interpreted as taking the place of *Fa-la-la-la*.

It must be further explained that the basal notes of the songs are usually more or less unrelated to each other — at least such has been the case in the comparatively few Hermit Thrush songs I have heard. Thus, the consecutive basal notes in a record I had made at Hebron a few days before my visit to Pompanoosuc were —



and so on. It will be noticed that there is no indication here of any normal order of utterance of these notes and the phrases based on them, and that the harmonic progressions of the different chords involved are not such as we commonly find in our own music. This is not to say that the music of this thrush was not attractive — there was a wild beauty in it that was delightful to the ear, — but merely that it shows no close relationship in its modulations to our own music.

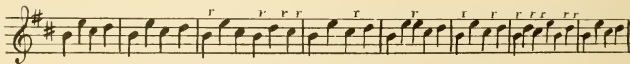
In the song heard at Pompanoosuc, however, there was a very perceptible normal order of the basal notes and their dependent phrases, and that order made a harmonic progression such as completely satisfies the requirements of human music. The basal notes, together with the chords founded on them, arranged in what was palpably the normal order were —



Here we have a very attractive, and at the same time a very human, harmonic progression — from B to E minor, then to A with the minor seventh (C# being the basal note), which leads naturally into D. If this combination of chords be played over and over, with the fact borne in mind that it represents the untaught music of a wild bird, its remarkable character will be well understood.

The principal phrases were interspersed with the light refrain previously mentioned, which did not differ substantially from the form of those noted at Hebron and many other places.

The fact that the order of the harmonies here given was the normal one is abundantly shown by the following extract from a long record I made of the basal notes as the bird sang them — this extract also shows the frequency of the light refrain, which is indicated by the letter *r* (not noted during the singing of the first eight phrases and last four) —



I may have failed to note the light refrain occasionally during the singing of the above; but the record shows the minimum frequency with which it was uttered. I have included in bars the four phrases when sung in normal order. In one instance, it will be observed, the E was repeated, but this does not affect the sequence of harmonies.

In respect to having a normal order and departing from it freely this song resembles several rhythmical songs of Wood Thrushes I have secured, in which the normality of a certain order was very

evident, though variations were frequent. In every case the singer seems to maintain the normal order more steadily after it has gotten into the swing of its singing, so to speak, and when it is not disturbed in the slightest degree — a very little disturbance, such as the distant barking of a dog, is sufficient to disarrange the sequence.

The remarkable character of the song of the Pompanoosuc Hermit Thrush is sufficiently evident to anyone who has any but the dullest ear for music. But I wish to call special attention to the additional proof it offers of the relationship between bird and human music. The chance that the bird happened upon this human progression of harmonies by coincidence is no less remote than that a wild bird—say a Purple Grackle—should utter with perfect pronunciation and inflection the words “My appetite is excellent this morning” through an accidental grouping of articulate sounds. In the case of the grackle we should without hesitation discard the theory of accidental coincidence and assert that the bird expressed itself in human speech. So, too, in the case of the Hermit Thrush must we discard the untenable theory of coincidence and declare that the bird expresses itself in human music.

The notes recorded were sung with great accuracy of intonation—my ear is very keen to detect variations from the true pitch. They were truer to the scale than those of nine human singers out of every ten, and were recorded exactly as given. The song is doubtless exceptional — though I judge that fuller study of the singing of Hermit Thrushes than it has yet received would disclose other songs showing similar harmonic correspondence with our own musical requirements,— but *any* such resemblance to our musical forms as it displays, though but a single instance, would serve to establish relationship between bird and human music, while the large number of recorded instances so far as other species are concerned, makes the principle absolutely impregnable. A little thought will show that coincidence is as much out of the question as in the case of the hypothetical blackbird above mentioned, and that imitation, as an explanation, has as little standing. Astonishing and revolutionary as it may seem, there is no escape from the conclusion that the evolution of bird music independently parallels the evolution of human music and that, therefore, such evolution in each case is not fortuitous, but tends inevitably toward a fixed ideal.